

Will a distanced workforce be the norm?

MARK PAVILONS

In these times of remote living, we've adopted a completely new mind set. Our brains are now configured via YouTube and various virtual meeting platforms. We're as one-dimensional as our on-screen images. We lack colour, umph and a certain je ne sais quoi. With increased vaccinations, when will remote work end? After 18 months of isolation and forced confinement, we're tired. We've become accustomed to online learning for our kids. Some of us have grown to like distanced virtual meetings and chats. Some have become quite adept at online shopping and ordering essentials. With the aggressive vaccination program taking place here and across the country, the light may be at the end of the tunnel. Let's hope it's not the headlight of yet another oncoming COVID train! When things start to bounce back and return to "normal," what will society and the workforce look like? Will everything suddenly snap back to the way it was, pre-COVID? Will the hands of time magically turn back and we'll all just continue merrily along? I doubt it. If you look at white collar business, government and even education, there have been many innovations and improvements. Efficiencies have been found and created, often out of necessity. Nevertheless, if companies find they can get by, and do well, with less, they will. Less meaning fewer bodies. Greater online presence and automation can only spell misery for part of our workforce. If the summer of 2021 comes and goes with fewer meaningful employment opportunities, it could spell disaster. Many young people, and in fact all of those displaced already, need to get a job. They need to work and generate income. There have already been irreparable losses to the retail and service sector in this province. Doors will remain closed. Those on the brink before the pandemic have surely plunged into the abyss. I hear comments from "experts" on how Canadians will spend their "COVID savings." What savings? Sure, very few of us went on vacation last summer, but that's hardly a savings. We haven't gone on a family vacation in many years. With increases in the cost of groceries, gas, building supplies, car parts, etc., we're losing ground financially. Our take-home pay is getting gobbled up faster than we can earn it. Despite promises of cuts in utility rates, my hydro and gas bills are growing. There's no relief in many other "necessities" like cell service, cable and internet. These companies continue to make record profits, pandemic or not. Some businesses may opt for a balance between remote working and in-person working once the pandemic ends, with hybrid models. According to HR firm Peninsula Canada, employers should consider how either arrangement might affect operations, as well as the wishes of their workforce. There will be a percentage of workers who have grown accustomed to remote work and won't want to go back to commuting once it is safe for workplaces to reopen. Calling all staff back the minute government orders are relaxed could lead to resentment and work refusals. To ease staff back into the workplace, employers can consider calling staff back on a rotational basis or staggering shift start and end times. As an alternative, employers can give workers the flexibility of choosing which days to come into office and working remotely the rest of the week. The best HR approach, Peninsular says, will be a balance between meeting the requirements of the business and the wishes of staff. Employers should take into consideration that all businesses are unique and that solutions will have to be as well. Soon, we will all have received the first dose of the COVID vaccine. The debate continues on which one is best, and which will stand the test of time when second doses are administered later this year. It's not really known whether we will achieve full mass immunity. That means some of our COVID habits will remain with us for some time. We will likely continue to wear masks, follow social distancing and limit gatherings. Workplaces will have mandatory health and safety measures from here on in. Undoubtedly, our population, and that of the civilized world, will adopt new hygiene methods. We will become a world of hand-washers, sanitizers and germ avoiders. I don't know how that will impact services that require that "human touch." I speculate that once the stay-at-home order is lifted this week, there may be pent-up demand for getting out, getting goods and getting lunch. If all goes well, the summer of 2021 could tip the scales in favour of normalcy. It could help revive an otherwise stagnant economy. There's no question the pandemic has sucked the life out of many of us. We all need a break. But the reality is the pandemic has impacted our personal finances. We can't all dash out to cottages, B&Bs and resorts and let loose. It may have to be the summer of frugal back yard BBQs of no-name hotdogs and hamburgers. I hope those who have felt the sting can get their lives back in order. I hope displaced workers can find employment. I hope ?

